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ABSTRACT

The case for the inclusion of aesthetic education with the traditional basic courses of reading, writing, and arithmetic is examined. The following points are emphasized in regarding arts education as a basic: (1) Aesthetic experience is basic because it is a primary form of experience on which all cognition, judgment, and action depend. It is the fundamental and distinctive power of image making by the imagination. It furnishes the raw material for concepts and ideals, for creating a world of possibility. (2) The source of meaning and its exfoliation into ideas, theories, values, visions, plans, and invention is the imagination. (3) The case for arts education depends on what art can do to clarify and enrich experience that the other subjects in the curriculum cannot. (4) Art orders feeling by giving it an expressive form perceptible by the senses--an image. Finally, the aesthetic response is indispensable to all experience and instruction in the aesthetic response is both possible and necessary. (JD)

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HOW BASIC IS AESTHETIC EDUCATION? or IS 'RT THE FOURTH R?*

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Introduction

It has been some time since I had the privilege of addressing an ASCD meeting, perhaps because my views on education have remained on the dull side responding with caution to innovations that have generated wave after wave of excitement, each of about five years duration. There have been at least three such flood tides in the last 15 years: the pursuit of academic excellence for the elites in the first five; relating compassionately to the disadvantaged in the second five; and basics for everyone in the third. However, we have learned that curricula, texts, the minds of teachers and the methods of teaching, let alone the real, albeit often subconscious expectations of the public do not change so fast.

You will understand my uneasiness therefore, at hearing that arts education/aesthetic education was to be promoted as part of the return to the basics. Were the arts to be sold by trading on the public's demands for instruction in reading? Were we to capitalize on the ambiguities in the meaning of "basics" to change the public's perception of the arts programs from a pleasant frill to a stern necessity?

Understandably, some advocates of aesthetic education or arts education want to take advantage of the current popularity of the basics. The arts did not share in the surge to curricular excellence of the early 60s, nor did they cash in on the wave of compassion that characterized educational reform in the late 60s and very early 70s. They are hoping for better luck if they can march under the banner of basics for everyone of the middle 70s. For one thing, if the arts could be included among the basics, they would no longer be dropped from the curriculum at the first budget pinch. For another, the mandating of competence in reading as a requirement for exit from schooling and the interest of the federal funding agencies make the basics not only an educational bandwagon, but a possible money wagon as well.**

There is nothing wrong with being alert to financial opportunity. Arts education needs all the help it can get--to survive, let alone

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* Adress, ASCD annual meeting, Houston, Texas, March 20, 1977.

** One of the major divisions of the funding of projects by NIE is called basics.

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flourish--but in the long run honesty is the safest as well as the best policy, and honesty counsels a careful examination of the senses in which arts education is basic and what can reasonably be promised by the school if it is so regarded.*

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* The plight of arts education programs is puzzling in the face of the unprecedented popularity of serious art. Museums, dance companies, symphony orchestras are drawing crowds. Art objects are sought for investment and are the targets of the better class of burglars. But the anomaly can be explained if the public believes that appreciation of art is a wholly subjective, mystical matter to which instruction is irrelevant and/or that exposure to art is all that arts education requires. Ironically, some of the most devoted advocates of arts education have fostered these beliefs, which are good arguments for schools staying out of formal arts instruction.

Art education as a motivator

First of all, how valid is the claim that learning how to draw, sing, paint, dance, and write poetry will improve reading scores or scores in arithmetic and penmanship? We are already being told about studies that make claims of this sort, and the alleged improvement is explained in one or both of two ways. One explanation is that scores in the three r's rise because experience with the arts improve the attitude toward schooling; art activities are interesting, turn pupils on, and are more concrete than bookish studies. This improvement in motivation, it is hypothesized, carries over to other phases of school work. Because discipline is so closely related to motivation, anything that promises to capture attention and maintain interest is always welcomed by schoolkeepers. The second explanation invokes the hypothesis that work in the arts improves the perceptual powers and psychomotor dexterity, and that this transfers to analogous operations in reading, writing, and possibly computation.

I have no evidence for or against these hypotheses, but granting for the sake of the argument, that they have some plausibility it would take a very impressive improvement in the three r's and a very tight correlation of it with work in the arts to warrant the costs in time and money of an arts education program. More time spent on the three r's with the employment of appropriate electronic technology and behavior modification devices would achieve the desired results more cheaply and more reliably, albeit less pleasantly, and at a serious cost to other educational values.

The aesthetic educational program can make a few points by claiming to be a bit of jam that makes the dry study of the three r's more palatable,

but I regard this as a weak reason for the program, and I fear that school boards feel the same way. The aesthetic education program must make its case on its contribution to aesthetic values and the value of aesthetic values and not on its putative nonaesthetic spinoffs.

Art as the fourth r

A second argument for regarding the arts education program as one of the basics is that it is in fact a fourth r. If reading and arithmetic are codes or languages in which ideas are stored, so to speak, then one might also think of the artistic skills as learning the codes by which one penetrates the realm of ideas and feelings in the form of images in various media. It is in this sense that one refers to the "languages of the arts". Thus the skills of artistic impression are compared to the skills of reading, and the skills of artistic expression presumably correspond to the skills of writing. The analogy holds pretty well for the making of art objects, especially when technical standards are important. When they are not, messing around with clay, paint, sounds, gestures, requires no special skill or skill training, and the skill analogy is weakened.

Similarly, the skills of impression require no special training so long as the commerce is with the popular arts. One learns to perceive them adequately and to respond to them properly by sharing the enthusiasm of the peer group for whatever music or fiction or drama or movie happens to be the rage at the moment. This shared enthusiasm guarantees concentrated attention to and incessant repetition of the content, forms, and norms of popular arts. Appreciation results, as a rule, without the benefit of formal instruction.

Nor are special programs of formal instruction necessary for the perception of everyday aesthetic objects such as scenery, facial expressions, modes of speech and dress, landscaping, and interior decoration. There is a conventional version of what is aesthetically appropriate in these fields, and anyone can learn it from the advertising media. We learn informally the standard images of luxury, expensiveness, elegance and their opposites. How our emotions are supposed to be expressed conventionally in speech, music, and gesture are also learned informally. We rely heavily on the popular arts to show us the forms that our feelings are expected to exhibit.

There is an important difference between the skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, on the one hand, and those of aesthetic impression and expression, on the other. The former are abstract in that c-a-t, e.g., does not smell, sound, feel, or look like a real cat. The symbol is conventional and to the learner arbitrary; no amount of direct experience with cats would suggest it, any more than it would suggest K-a-t-z or c-h-a-t.*

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* This would not be so true for symbols that do resemble their objects.

So somebody has to take the time and trouble to reveal the connection between symbol and thing. In spoken language this pointing out occurs by naming of objects by adults, but even more one learns what stands for what in common action where objects and their speech names occur simultaneously. In mathematics, of course, the level of abstraction is even more of an obstacle to informal learning; beyond counting, ordinary speech does not reveal the operations by which the number system relates the concepts of quantity.

The arts are not codes in this sense and certainly not abstract codes, although on occasion they use symbols that have to be learned (for example, many of the religious symbols used in painting and poetry). On the contrary, the arts present us with images of thought and feeling that in some way are what they symbolize: the picture of an angry sea looks angry and sad music sounds sad just as a dark, cloudy sky looks threatening.

A work of art should communicate, of whatever it is the image, without footnotes or explanations, but some serious art does not. This happens when the work of art uses images with which we are not familiar. Some of the religious art of previous centuries falls into this category. In literary works, the language of another period may stand in the way of immediate response, for example, the language of Chaucer and at times even of Shakespeare and Milton. More important obstacles to perception are abrupt changes in style. Highly abstract painting or musical composition, for example, baffle us if we are expecting the more conventional forms. Many movie goers are troubled by films that have no discernible plot or that have no distinguishable beginning, middle, and ending. Some contemporary fiction presents similar difficulties. Because serious art does not engage large portions of the population intensively as does popular art, new styles and new forms are not learned by constant repetition and shared enthusiasm. Often only a small coterie of artists are sensitive to some of the experiments being carried on in the studies. For those who do not belong to the coteries of the art world (past or present) a product of that world is a stranger whose character has to be learned; it is not written simply on his face.

The vibrations emanating from an orchestra playing avant-garde music are the same for all normal ears, but what is heard depends on the patterns into which the incoming stimuli are sorted, and the sorting is quite different for those who are familiar with the principles of atonal or aleatory composition than for those who are not. To those unfamiliar with the more experimental forms of the modern art film, the succession of images is episodic, disorganized, and disturbing. By the afficianado of modern film festivals the images are combined and judged differently. Similar observations hold for avant-garde fiction, drama, and dance.

While modern experimental art forms present the greatest difficulty to the uninitiated, even familiar classical art is not equally accessible to all. The viewer or participant may not be tuned to the style of a

bygone era or the techniques of a particular period. But with any art the naive observer fails to perceive more than a small fraction of what is contained in the work: its sensory variations; its formal properties, and the subtlety of the feelings that it objectifies in an image. From the artist's point of view he sees or hears the wrong things.

It is precisely these properties that the skills of aesthetic impression render perceptible, and the more these skills are perfected the greater the chance that the impact of the work of art will approach that which it has on those who have devoted themselves to serious art with the ardor that the young bestow on the latest slang or rock group sensation.

Less need be said here about the skills of aesthetic expression because most arts programs concetrate on them. Two points, however, are relevant. First, early work in this area (K-6) is for the most part making objects in the various media in the hope that the artistic skill thereby attained will continue to be used in later life. For those with talent and persistence this is a fairly reliable prediction; for most of the school and adult population it is not, although leniency with respect to technical standards has encouraged Sunday painters and late evening poets to keep on expressing themselves. For most adults media other than ordinary language are abandoned as means of expression, even as amateurs. Second, the traditional emphasis on the skills of expression has not succeeded in moving such programs from the periphery of the curriculum to its center.

Nevertheless, performance activity in various media is probably a necessary condition for acquiring the skills of impression, because so much of proper aesthetic perception depends on familiarity with the expressive potentialities of paint, clay, sound, gesture, etc., but the more the program is confined to these activities the less likely will it be seen as a basic study that ought to be required of everyone and more as a pleasant diversion or professional preparation.

One can speak properly about basic skills of aesthetic impression and expression. This claim, it seems to me, is legitimate, but whether it will be honored in the curriculum depends on the value ascribed to aesthetic experience.

<u>The right relation to the 3 R's</u>

There is an important relation between the three r's and the aesthetic skills but it is not their correlation with test scores on the mechanics of reading or computation. Suppose we read "This is the forest primeval/ The murmuring pines and the hemlocks." What is a forest? A park, a grove of trees, tall trees, scraggly ones? The image to be conjured up is a forest that contains at least some pines and hemlocks. They are very old and they are murmuring. What are they murmuring? Is there a wind that makes them murmur? What is primeval? How much of the necessary

imagery depends upon the mechanical skill of reading? How much on the stirring up of images, ideas, and meanings deposited into our experience from bith on?

But we don't have to rely on examples from poetry. Beyond the simplest forms of naming: "This is a tree," "This is a cow," "A cow gives milk," "This is milk," all discourse depends on the participants instating a relevant context of meaning. That context originally is built up of visual, tactile, olfactory, auditory images. Long before we know the definition of a shifty character we have the image of a shifty face. Fairy tales, movies, television--virtually all experience--have built in us an imagic store.* Logic and science refines these

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* H. S. Broudy, "Research Into Imagic Association and Cognitive Interpretation," Research in the Teaching of English, 7:2, 240-259, Fall,1973.

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contents into more precise concepts and relationships, but without the images the terms are bare formula--a kind of imperfect computer language far removed from human discourse. Consider, for example, how persons using different imagic contexts would construe the sentence: "We are working around the clock." We read with our imagination.

When it is reported that high school graduates can't read, the public is shocked but perhaps not for the proper reasons. There are at least two proper reasons: one is that the nonreaders lack access to the meanings encased in written language; the other is that the imagic store of the nonreaders is impoverished and therewith their resources for interpretation and comprehension. As to improper reasons, I would suggest inability to read want ads, utility bills, and business letters. Useful as these operations are, they do not require the maintenance of a public school system; to make them the criteria for even minimum proficiency is a declaration of bankruptcy by the public school.

Is aesthetic experience basic?

There is a more significant meaning of basic, however, on which arts education/aesthetic education should be tested and on which its claims should be argued. Granted there are aesthetic skills, how basic in the sense of being foundational or important, is the aesthetic experience to which the skills are instrumental? It seems to me that this is the sense of basic that is being denied when the arts program is regarded as a peripheral luxury rather than a central necessity. When a school board wipes out or materially reduces the program, it is not denying that there are artistic skills. Nor are the members saying that aesthetic experience is undesirable. On the contrary, they are unstining in their respect for and praise of the arts. But they are saying with their pocketbooks that this kind of experience is not indispensable to the education of the total school population. If we cannot dispute this belief, we shall wage the battle for the arts program without convincing the public and perhaps not even ourselves.

to clarify feeling by expressing it in an image. Acting out our feelings--running from danger, striking the enemy, taking the drug--does not clarify them; science tells us why we have them but not what they mean--only the image supplied by art does that.

Serious art does in a highly refined and concentrated way what popular art does without conscious tuition. But it explores possibilities of feeling that extend far beyond the routinized experience of everyday life. Popular art (popular music, the soap operas,) portrays the feelings large numbers now share: serious art creates images of feeling that we may have not yet brought to consciousness, sometimes by making the strange familiar; sometimes by making the familiar strange.

The school and aesthetic skills

That the aesthetic experience has intrinsic value; that beauty is its own excuse are valid reasons for making the arts a part of our lives. But they do not prove that schooling in the arts is either basic or necessary. It is basic if we can show that the aesthetic response is indispensable to all experience and that instruction in the aesthetic response is both possible and necessary. We can, I believe, defend both of these theses.

However, two views currently and widely held are almost certain to undercut the argument for formal instruction in the aesthetic skills. One is that in the aesthetic domain anything goes, and that there is no ascertainable difference between popular and serious art. If this is so, schools, it will be argued, will not and should not devote their resources to making happen what will happen anyway. The other is that if the young are sufficiently exposed to "good" art and artists, the goals of aesthetic education--activity and appreciation--will be achieved. Perhaps they will. Let us go further and say that given enough exposure they almost certainly will. But this is not so much an argument for an arts program in the schools as for supporting museums, libraries, community projects, and the mass media. It is up to us to show that the aesthetic experience is basic to the educated life and mind, and that only the school can provide entry skills into this domain as it can in others.

We can demystify aesthetic instruction without destroying the mystique of art, if we concentrate on the skills of aesthetic perception, namely, the skills of aesthetic expression and impression. We can improve the sensitivity of the learner (any educated learner) to the aesthetic properties of objects. In the earlier grades this can be done in connection with manipulation of materials in the various media; later more demonstrations and analysis can be used.* The important point is

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* I have elaborated on this approach in numerous papers and in Enlightened Cherishing: An Essay on Aesthetic Education, Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Aesthetic experience is basic because it is a primary form of experience on which all cognition, judgment, and action depend. It is the fundamental and distinctive power or image making by the imagination. It furnishes the raw material for concepts and ideals, for creating a world of possibility. Theologically it may be true that in the beginning was the word, but historically it was probably the image or a word-image that came first. Certainly the story of the creation is itself primarily a mighty image.

The source of meaning and its exfoliation into ideas, theories, values, visions, plans, and invention is the imagination. It is the matrix and motivator of all that is characteristically human. Dampen image making and image perceiving, and creating are diminished and intelligence itself is deflated. This is as true in everyday knowing, thinking, feeling and choosing as it is in the highest reaches of science and art. Madison Avenue understands this; every successful politician takes advantage of images; every enterprise depends on it. Yet the curriculum of the school does not reflect the centrality of aesthetic experience. Or, what may be even more strange the development of the imagination is left to chance, as if it were a wayward divertissement in the life of the mind.

The case for arts education depends on what art can do to clarify and enrich experience that the other subjects in the curriculum cannot. Roughly, art is to feeling what science is to thought. Science restructures ordinary experience by imposing theoretical form on it. When, for example, burning is explained by chemistry an everyday phenomenon is seen in a way that connects it with a vast range of phenomena that in ordinary life do not seem to be related at all e.g., rusting of iron and the death of fish at certain seasons in lakes near nuclear reactors.

Science tells us that the thorns protect the rose from certain insects; this makes the existence of thorns intelligible. In one of Robert Burns' poems a lover, says "You stole the rose and left the thorn." ("The Rose and the Thorn") How many thousands of lines of psychological analysis would it take to clarify the feeling expressed in this metaphor? What would our vigorous politicians, business men, and bureaucrats do for clarification of their mission without the metaphors of war and sport--target, task force, contingency planning, bucking the line, holding the fort, running interference, etc.?

Art orders feeling by giving it an expressive form perceptible by the senses--an image. When Dante has Virgil say "The redeemed are seen, rank on rank, as the petals of the divine rose," it is the artist bringing to eye and ear what literally cannot be seen or heard, namely, the essence of Christian theology.* Popular art is witness to the unremitting desire

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* "In Form, then, of a white rose displayed itself to me that sacred soldiery which in his blood Christ made his spouse ..." Paradiso, Canto XXXI.

that it can be done systematically with subjects not endowed with unusual artistic talent. These skills will not turn the pupil into an artist nor an enlightened critic, but it will give the confidence that one is seeing, hearing, imagining somewhat as the artist does. Perhaps this is not all we would wish aesthetic education to accomplish, but anything less is probably not worth the resources we are seeking, and anything more depends on our doing at least this much--the basics--well.

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